Religions de Rome et du monde romain

Religion and government in the Roman Empire

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The first two lectures had as their aim to provide an historical sociology of religion in the high Roman Empire. The third and fourth lectures establish legal evidence in hermeneutic relation to problems in the history of religion.

1. Personal religion and imperial subjectivity

The first two lectures sought to explain the rise of conceptions of individual religious affiliation that were understood as distinct from the structures of political belonging. These drew principally on two bodies of scholarship. On the one hand, the dominant models of religion in the ancient world religious life as embedded within larger political or cultural formations. On this view, the traditional cults of Greek and Roman cities were ordered by principles homologous to those that organized their dominant political and cultural institutions and indeed were not conceptualized as distinct from them. The adherence of individuals to such cults was then assumed to follow upon local structures of political belonging: as cities each had their own gods, so citizens worshipped the gods of their cities.

During the high Roman Empire these foundations were increasingly undermined. To explain how this occurred, the structures of imperial administrative and communicative practice are analyzed as aiding to produce among subjects of empire a new and distinctively imperial form of subjectivity. The analysis draws upon the lectures of Michel Foucault in his *cours* at the Collège de France from 1977-1978 and 1978-1979, which constitute the second body of scholarship underpinning this inquiry.

In my view, the work of Roman government gradually atomized individuals in respect to the traditional structures of poliadic belonging. As a result, religious affiliation could increasingly be conceptualized as distinct from political membership. Likewise, "religion" as a distinct category of individual identity, and "religions" as distinct from each other, could now be broadly theorized. The result was a landscape in which the concept of conversion acquired widespread utility.

2. The imperial roots of the religious body

The second lecture undertakes a similar inquiry in respect to the asceticism. It falls into three parts. It first seeks to demonstrate that shame of the body as a justification for ascetic practice is always explained by reference to classical theories of the soul. Some small number of individuals had cultivated forms of social practice on this basis for centuries. Second, it urges that Christian justified

their own ascetic practice in similar terms. Indeed, early Christians interpreted Scriptural antecedents for "withdrawal" in light of exactly those philosophical that had motivated ascetic practice among non-Christians. The sudden popularity of bodily discipline in the fourth century therefore requires explanation outside the domains where it has traditionally been sought. The third part of the lecture urges a turn to politics, where, I argue, a concern for the cultivation of the self became a pronounced feature of doctrines of both kingship and citizenly virtue during the fourth century. In the conclusion to the lecture, I connect this concern for the body of the citizen with another distinctive feature of fourth-century government, namely, the desire of legislation to penetrate society to the level of the individual. To achieve this, imperial legislation sought to mobilize non-statal forms of social dependency in service of state interest.

3. How might one explain Roman "tolerance"? The paradigm of legal pluralism

The third lecture uses the abundant evidence for both practice and theory in respect to legal pluralism as a guide to the reconstruction of practice and elaboration of ancient theory in respect to religious pluralism. On one level, the lecture seeks to demonstrate that pluralism in local practice was understood to conduce a distinctively imperial order. Within the domain of the history of religion, the lecture urges that classical Roman writings about the religions of others focus overwhelmingly on practice. Whether ordaining a continuity of religious practice or urging the maintenance of religious properties, Roman legislation concerns itself with rites, not with gods. The rise to prominence of a discourse on pluralism in which gods play a central role –each potentially the object of a separate "religion"– is a distinctive feature of high imperial Christian thought.

4. The history of religion according to the Romans: the testimony of the law

The final lecture addresses the paradox that the Romans were manifestly committed to continuity in the conduct of rites, even as documentary records reveal a rich tradition of improvisation in just that domain. The lecture compares evidence from legal practice and doctrine to practice and doctrine in the conduct of religious rites, in order to reconstruction the historical self-consciousness operative in these domains. The first part analyzes legal evidence in four areas: accounts of the origins of law; explanations of the circumstances of change in the law; the institutional mechanisms for effecting and authorizing change; and the discursive means available within the legal tradition for explaining change in relation to earlier norms.

The second part turns to thought and action in the domain of religion but proceeds in reverse order: it commences with the forms and justification of innovation in the present and only later studies the historical self-consciousness operative in religious texts. It urges in conclusion that these two traditions, legal and religious, reveal Roman thought to have possessed a distinctive ontology of the social, very different from that visible in any other literary tradition of Mediterranean Antiquity.